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The Rationalization of Leisure: Marxist Feminism and the Fantasy of Machine Subordination

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ABSTRACT Critical analyses of domestic technological culture have emphasized the impact of domestic technologies on intensifying women's labor and reinforcing its privatization within the home, all the while being marketed as laborsaving devices. Drawing from the ways the marketing of domestic technologies framed the home as a space in need of technological administration, this article offers a Marxist feminist analysis of online surveillance during leisure time, examining how the marketing of technologies for both domestic labor and online leisure helps produce relationships between subjects and technologies that double as vehicles for capital accumulation. The article argues that we should look to the history of domestic technological design to understand the ways online surveillance and data collection are used to produce revenue and impact consumer behavior, given that both domestic technologies and contemporary information technologies work to rationalize non-waged time. The article begins with the Taylorization of the home popularized in 1912, followed by the rise of domestic technologies in the 1950s, in order to demonstrate how the ideological framing of the home as a space in need of rationalization informs the marketing of today's personalization technologies. The marketing of personalization technologies reproduces the racialized and gendered logic of machine subordination that framed domestic technologies for the home in the 20th century. The article concludes with a discussion of how Marxist feminism is a useful theoretical framework for understanding and developing a political response to online data collection, given that both the domestic sphere and online leisure time are traditionally understood to be outside the workday, and therefore supposedly outside the scope of capitalist workplace relations of surveillance and exploitation.

Cultural Studies and Media Studies scholarship have given Marxism a great deal of attention as a way of thinking through the impact of new media industries on both recognized and unrecognized work. Yet Marxist feminism, outside the work of Kylie Jarrett, has not figured prominently as a theoretical lens by which we can understand the exploitation of data in the digital economy. As Nick Srnicek explains, given the decline of manufacturing profitability, capitalism has given an increasingly central role to extracting and controlling data for a range of purposes, including the refinement of algorithms, the coordination and outsourcing of workers, the increased flexibility of production, and the management of markets.¹ This article joins Jarrett in the project of "bringing feminist theorization and activism about . . . unpaid reproductive work out of the domestic sphere, applying its insights to contemporary digital media."² However, it offers a different theory of the relationship between consumption online and capitalist exploitation—one which centers the role of digital technology in extracting profit from unwaged time, while resisting the conceptualization of online consumption and leisure-time as unremunerated labor.

Drawing from the ways the marketing of domestic technologies framed the home as a space in need of technological administration, this article offers a Marxist feminist analysis of online surveillance during leisure time, examining how the marketing of technologies for both domestic labor and online leisure helps produce relationships between subjects and technologies that double as vehicles for capital accumulation. Critical analyses of domestic technological culture have emphasized the impact of

domestic technologies on intensifying women's labor and reinforcing its privatization within the home, all the while being marketed as laborsaving devices.³ The rise of domestic technologies for the home coincided with discourses advocating for the home's scientific management, which is contingent upon the monitoring and rational management of domestic life.

Building from Marxist feminism's analysis of exploitation outside the wage-relation and drawing from the ways unwaged domestic labor became subjected to technological rationalization, I argue that commercial forms of surveillance, and in particular, personalization technologies—technologies that accumulate information about consumer behaviors, buying habits, and demographic data to market goods and services to targeted audiences—should be situated as part of the genealogy of the rationalization of leisure time. By the rationalization of leisure time, I mean the application of workplace discipline and surveillance to time and space outside of the wage-relation. Contemporary personalization technologies are enmeshed in a larger web of cultural practices that make online leisure time profitable by monitoring, rationalizing, and commodifying user behavior. These technologies are indebted to the migration of workplace philosophies concerning time management and discipline to the home. We should look to the history of domestic technological design to understand the ways online surveillance and data collection are used to produce revenue and impact consumer behavior, given that both domestic technologies and contemporary personalization technologies work to rationalize non-waged time.

Tracing a genealogy of the rationalization of leisure illustrates the linkages between the ideological framing of the home as a space in need of technological administration, and of leisure time as requiring personalization technologies. In both cases, there is a discursive logic of time-management and efficiency, as well as fantasies of machine subordination, which structure the marketing of these technologies. My aim is to track the conditions of possibility that marketing for technology produces for the rationalization of time outside the wage relation, and not to assert a direct causal relationship between domestic technologies, on the one hand, and personalization technologies, on the other. I begin with the Taylorization of the home popularized in 1912—the application of Frederick Winslow Taylor's principles of scientific management within the home economics movement, which transported the traditional work ethic into the domestic sphere—followed by the rise of domestic technologies in the 1950s. There is a strong parallel between marketing discourse's ideological framing of domestic technologies in the 1950s and 1960s as “electric servants” and contemporary anthropomorphized software agents and “digital butlers.” Marketing discourse promoted the management of domestic life as a “service” provided by a subordinate machine-other, oftentimes racialized and gendered female, concealing the intensification of domestic labor—the increased amount of time spent cleaning and the rising expectations of cleanliness that resulted from the introduction of domestic technologies.

Personalization technologies are a continuation of this rationalization of the home in ways that produce profit for capitalism. While domestic technologies for the home helped to intensify domestic work and created demand for new household products and technologies, personalization technologies exploit user data through continuous online surveillance in order to target goods, ads, and services to users most likely to provide a return on capitalist investment. Personalization technologies are also predicated on a discourse where mastery over technology is associated with individual freedom and empowerment, and thus the marketing of these technologies reproduces the racialized and gendered logic of machine subordination that framed domestic technologies for the home. This logic helps to further obfuscate the ways these technologies render time

profitable for capitalism, given the emphasis placed on subjugating, as opposed to being subjugated by, technology.

The article concludes with a discussion of how Marxist feminism is a useful theoretical framework for developing a political response to online data collection, given that both the domestic sphere and online leisure time are traditionally understood to be outside the workday, and therefore supposedly outside the scope of capitalist surveillance and exploitation. Marxist feminism provides a critique of the domestic space as a site of labor predicated on the subordination of women and perpetuated through the mystification of housework as a “natural, unavoidable and even fulfilling activity,” an “act of love” that is inherently feminine, and thus non-work.⁴ This framework helps critical scholars of media technology to understand how the aggregation of data produced during subjects’ online leisure time can also be understood as a site of capitalist oppression, mystified through the racialized and gendered fantasy of machine subordination that shaped the integration of information technology into the home.

The Rationalization of Leisure Time

According to Kathi Weeks, the scientific management of the home in the early twentieth century signaled the importation of the traditional work ethic into the domestic sphere.⁵ Christine Frederick helped pioneer the standardization of the kitchen space and popularized the Taylorization of the middle class home through her articles in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which later became the foundation for her book, *The New Housekeeping: Efficiency Studies In Home Management*.⁶ Whereas for Marxist feminists in the 1970s, the identification of the home as a site of work was a way of challenging the subordination of women to men, their exclusion from the working class, and the exploitation of reproductive labor,⁷ Frederick’s identification of the domestic space as a site of work was fully compatible with capitalist principles of efficiency, productivity, and commodification. This compatibility is typified by an advertisement for the Hotpoint All-Electric Kitchen (1960). The ad celebrates Hotpoint as the “First to Introduce A Complete, Smartly Styled, Custom-Matched, All-Electric Kitchen With Scientifically-Planned Work-Saving Centers!”⁸ In theory, the Hotpoint helps women save time through the carefully planned layout of the kitchen, rendering domestic labor more efficient.

For Frederick, the problem with domestic work was that women were finding themselves “overcome, actually assuming the mental attitude, in regard to their work, of *slave to master*; instead of master to slave . . . the nutshell of the whole matter is *that women master their work, instead of letting their work master them*” (emphasis in original).⁹ Frederick argued that women needed to begin viewing the home as a space for efficiency, management, and organization in order to not be subjugated by their work. Frederick pathologizes women who do not regard homemaking as a scientific enterprise, noting that some women are consumed by “a mania for some one phase of housework—such as cleanliness, decoration, cooking, etc., on which all originality and effort is spent, to the neglect of general efficiency.”¹⁰ The master-slave relationship is ever-present in the discourse surrounding domestic technologies and the rational administration of the home, where mastery over a task or object helps perpetuate a sense of individual freedom from the constraints of labor and elevate one’s status, even as the domestic space is increasingly subjected to workplace discipline. The conceptualization of domesticity as labor thus did not emancipate women from the fetters of capitalism through demystification but instead perpetuated women’s subordination and isolation in the domestic sphere. Women were expected to uphold even higher standards of cleanliness through the “assistance” of scientific management that would supposedly help women complete their domestic tasks.

The marketing of domestic technologies, and visions of their future applications, reinforced the idea that these technologies were servants for the consumer's use. In 1957, O. O. Binder published the article, "You'll Own 'Slaves' by 1965."¹¹ Directly targeting the readership of *Mechanix Illustrated*, the male hobbyist, he wrote the following:

In 1863, Abe Lincoln freed the slaves. But by 1965, slavery will be back! We'll all have personal slaves again, only this time we won't fight a Civil War over them. Slavery will be here to stay. Don't be alarmed. We mean robot "slaves." Let's take a peek into the future to see what the Robot Age will bring.¹²

The expression "we'll all have personal slaves again" signals that Binder was speaking to white males, in particular, as participants in the fantasy of renewed slave ownership. Binder described a variety of robot slaves ready at the push of a button to serve their master. These domestic robots were imagined as capable of cleaning, helping one to dress, helping in the workplace as hyper-efficient secretaries and at home as home security devices. Binder concluded that, "the wonders of electronics will dominate every phase of our future life to make it more successful and pleasurable for everyone who lives on Earth."¹³ And yet, technologies for the home intensified the expectations of domestic work for women, manufactured a need for additional commodities, reproduced the association of womanhood with domesticity, and refigured the domestic sphere as a space in need of technological administration.¹⁴ In both Binder's utopian future and 1950s and 1960s advertisements concerning domestic technologies, the ability to subjugate another—in this case, a technological apparatus—was a means of codifying one's own status and reinforced the fantasy of minimizing work, despite its actual intensification in the push to rationalize the home.¹⁵

Advertisements for domestic technologies sought to distinguish housework from manual labor so that women would not feel devalued and defeminized by domestic work. As Adrian Forty explains, the illusion that domestic technologies were symbolic and material stand-ins for servants was an illusion that "helped quell any uneasiness that people might have felt about their status in society."¹⁶ Throughout the twentieth century, domestic servants were predominantly immigrants and women of color.¹⁷ Many households could no longer afford domestic workers after the Great Depression, and so technology was positioned as a replacement for these services. Domestic technologies such as vacuum cleaners received feminized names like "Daisy" and "Betty Anne" to underscore both their servant status as human substitutes and the feminized nature of domestic work.¹⁸ As domestic technologies became increasingly popular with middle-class women in the 1950s, the design was modified to look less industrial and machine-like, and more elegant and discreet.¹⁹ Advertisements predominantly featured white well-dressed women in high heels, empowered by expressing mastery over technologies that were marketed as "doing the work" on the woman's behalf.²⁰

These gendered and racialized cultural understandings of domestic technologies are also present in the marketing of the first computational devices for rationalizing the home. The Honeywell Kitchen Computer, offered in a 1969 Neiman Marcus Catalog, was a low-powered computer designed for storing recipes. Neiman Marcus marketed the computer as a device that, for \$10,600, could advise recipe selections based on the list of ingredients provided to the device. Although the Kitchen Computer was a marketing ploy and never meant to be sold, this piece of vaporware, according to Paul Atkinson, "shows that, real or not, non-products speak volumes about the perception, reception and consumption of, and our relationship to, technology, at culturally specific points in time."²¹ The Kitchen Computer helped to conceptualize the domestic sphere as a space in need of

technological assistance, where technology can help a woman plan her family's meals more effectively with a modernized kitchen.

The symbolic work that the Kitchen Computer does to reimagine the home as a space in need of computational administration is perhaps best captured in the original advertisement for the product. The ad features a well-manicured white woman leisurely resting her hand on the extremely large device with a streamlined design, helping to assimilate an object that would otherwise seem strikingly out of place in the wood-paneled kitchen.²² The caption reads, "If she can only cook as well as Honeywell can compute," a tagline that seeks to present the computer as rivaling the woman in skill and ingenuity. As Atkinson explains, the Kitchen Computer

reinforced the popular cultural representations of the domestic kitchen as the focus of family interactions with technology in the home, in a variety of forms. In addition, it inspired those working at the forefront of computer developments to realize that, despite the limitations of technology at the time, there was real value in seriously considering a domestic market for computer products.²³

Thus, the marketing of the Kitchen Computer precipitated the integration of computers into the domestic space, figuring the domestic sphere as "a territory ripe for computational colonization."²⁴

Home computing advertising would go on to transition from promoting the computer as primarily a hobbyist activity up until the mid-1980s to a "novel kind of 'information appliance'" for the home by the 1990s, helping to allay concerns about rapid technological transformation in American society.²⁵ Much like the technologies designed for rationalizing domestic labor, the home computer was advertised as laborsaving and easy to use.²⁶ This assimilation of computing into the home hinged on the symbolic work that ownership over the machine does to make its purchase meaningful for the consumer. As Elaine Lally explains, "It is through such symbolic action—establishing symbolically the right to claim a good as one's own—that the consumer is able to appropriate to her- or himself the meaning which the advertisers and manufacturers have inscribed within the commodity."²⁷

Much like the marketing of domestic technologies for the home, computers also have a legacy of being marketed as feminized and subservient objects to the extent that they are associated with providing services. One of the first desktop computers with a Graphic User Interface was Apple Lisa (1983), bearing a feminized moniker like the domestic technologies discussed earlier. In the promotional video for Apple Lisa, a well-dressed executive says to the camera, "What's so special about Lisa? Oh I've had other computers. But my Lisa's different."²⁸ This advertisement uses the clichéd language of heterosexual romantic entanglements to characterize the "special" relationship between the male executive and his technology. The gendering of the Apple computer, and the idea that the user can make the "power of Lisa" work for them, prevents the male executive from being feminized when engaged in the otherwise feminized labor of clerical work such as typing. His ability to subordinate the machine is marketed as a form of empowerment, which harkens back to the gendered and racialized logics of machine subordination that integrated domestic technologies into the home, albeit for women's use.

The development of computer personalization further entrenched the idea that the personal computer (PC) is a means of asserting one's individuality by engaging with machines designed to "serve" the user. As Fred Turner notes, "computers have seen the development of a 'dynamic of personalization' since the 1940s, in which both computers

and computer users have become progressively more individualized.”²⁹ Early visions of computer personalization included highly anthropomorphized software agents and digital butlers. Much like the domestic technologies that rationalized unwaged time and were represented as subordinate machine-others, the digital butler produced a fantasy of machine servitude. Nicholas Negroponte, a pioneer of human-machine interaction design, urged the development of agents that would “learn and develop over time, like human friends and assistants. It is not only the acquisition of a model of you; it is using it in context.”³⁰ Negroponte argued for the necessity of designing interfaces that could help sort through information and assist with the administration of the owner’s time:

The best metaphor I can conceive of for a human-computer interface is that of a well-trained English butler. The “agent” answers the phone, recognizes the callers, disturbs you when appropriate, and may even tell a white lie on your behalf. The same agent is well trained in timing, versed in finding the opportune moments, and respectful of idiosyncrasies. People who know the butler enjoy considerable advantage over a total stranger. That is just fine.³¹

Negroponte envisioned software butlers that knew enough about their owner that they could be modeled on their behavior, preferences, desires, and idiosyncrasies. This vision of software butlers resonates with the design of Ask Jeeves (1996), a digital search assistant that positioned the user as an employer of a virtual domestic servant;³² Siri (2010), Apple’s virtual assistant; Ms. Dewey (2006-2009), a Microsoft search engine; and Rover (1995), a cartoon dog that provided guidance and search assistance for Windows users. Rover’s design is informed by what Sianne Ngai might call an aesthetic of cuteness: its exaggerated passivity caters to consumer desires for “mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle.”³³ In the case of Ms. Dewey, this virtual agent was not only explicitly feminized but also racialized, performing, in the words of Miriam E. Sweeney, “stereotypical urban Blackness in response to racially coded search terms.”³⁴

The fantasy of machine subordination thus plays a pivotal role in structuring how users understand the purposes of digital assistants. According to Hal Varian, Google’s chief economist, the *Google Now* digital assistant is desirable because it provides a “Personal Assistant” for less wealthy consumers.³⁵ For users who lack positions of power in the workplace (which might otherwise provide human personal assistants), digital assistants offer the experience of having one’s needs and desires anticipated and efficiently managed. Similarly, the marketing of domestic technologies helped to ameliorate the class- and gender-based anxieties that middle class women might otherwise have experienced in carrying out their own domestic labor. Even if these women could no longer afford human domestic servants, they could now express mastery over domestic technologies.

In the case of Siri, a voice-controlled personal assistant that promises to serve as a “faster, easier way to do all kinds of useful things,” technological empowerment and efficiency are tied to the enduring logic of feminized technological subservience.³⁶ Siri is presented as a personal assistant with a female voice, often referred to as a “she” as opposed to an “it” online, who will make the user’s time more effectively spent. The anthropomorphism of Siri encourages users to form emotional attachments, and there are numerous documented instances of the device’s sexualization. Siri is also designed to actively participate in reinforcing its own anthropomorphism. For instance, Siri is programmed to respond to particular user questions with what has been described as “sass,” an attitude that reflects humor, wit, and sarcasm but does not ultimately destabilize Siri’s subservience to the user.³⁷

For instance, in one example of a user's interaction with Siri, a user asked what the movie *Inception* is about, and Siri responded, "Inception is about dreaming about dreaming about dreaming about dreaming about something or other. I fell asleep." In the case of another user comment, "I think you're sexy," Siri responded, "I'm just well put together," a joke predicated on Siri's performative awareness of being a machine. When the user posed the follow up question, "Do you think I'm sexy?" Siri responded, "Very much so."³⁸ This example not only illustrates an instance of Siri's sexualization, but also how Siri is designed to avoid alienating the user. As Jenny Davis argues, Siri's subservient role as secretary and service provider is coupled with her sexualization, feminization, and personification through the anthropomorphic gendering of Siri as female.³⁹ The user's fantasy of control over the machine mystifies the ways the user is also subordinated to the machine through the capitalist surveillance of the users' attention. Not only is user data collected to improve Siri's technology, but a 2015 report also alleges that third parties are mining Siri voice recordings for commercial gain.⁴⁰ Additionally, as Alexandra Chasin points out, "electronics stabilize the idea that a service class of being(s) is proper and even necessary; here, electronics participate in, and thereby reinforce, the unequal social and psychological dynamics upon which the myth of a constantly expanding middle class depends."⁴¹ Thus, visions of machine subservience also do ideological work in perpetuating the idea that there are a class of workers, subordinated by gender and race, whose purpose is to make it easier for others to live and work.

With contemporary online personalization in the form of targeted advertisements and recommendation algorithms, the interaction between users and personalization technologies is marketed as meaningful and fulfilling in that personalization provides the service of tailored options rather than mass-produced, standardized products, which theoretically saves users from both the inefficiencies and dissatisfactions of mass culture. Mark Andrejevic describes the discourse of the new media economy as a "now-it-can-be-told" promotional strategy: "It turns out that critical theorists were right about industrial capitalism all along: it is oppressive, top-down, and alienating after all. We can finally admit this because now we have the technology to leave it all behind."⁴² Personalization is framed as a means of organizing the relationship between consumers and producers in ways that take into consideration individual preferences and desires as opposed to being a form of media that imposes uniform desire for standardized products.⁴³

What distinguishes personalization from mass culture—where consumers can only passively consume the advertisement or commodity—is that personalization is self-reflexive and interactive in that consumers must make choices, indicate preferences, and are thus constantly investing time in improving the act of consuming in order to be presented with better options. The marketing discourse celebrating personalization frames it as a means of replacing the emphasis on production with an emphasis on consumers in a way that is highly personalized and individualized. This discourse also marks a shift towards structuring desires in terms of "preferences." Davenport and Beck argue that mass culture led to an "inordinate desire for individual-level attention" because it was incapable of addressing individual consumer preferences.⁴⁴ In this sense, personalization allegedly overcomes the inability of mass culture to provide meaningfully differentiated commodities. And yet, while personalization is marketed as a service for consumer empowerment through the importance placed on the user's desires and preferences, it is simultaneously a technology for monitoring, aggregating, and exploiting user data.

Personalization technologies are predicated on rationalizing, managing, and monitoring time and space outside the traditional workplace in order to influence individual consumers' choices. Platforms and applications track user behavior, buying habits, and

demographic data in order to more efficiently allocate how goods and services are advertised online. Ubiquitous leisure-time surveillance thus fragments consumers into characteristics and behavioral patterns for the purposes of strategically targeting them. Oscar Gandy describes this technique of market governance as the “panoptic sort,” the “all seeing eye of the difference machine that guide the global capitalist system.”⁴⁵ The panoptic sort classifies individuals based on their perceived market value, and individuals actively participate in their own classification through their engagement with brands and services.⁴⁶ Individuals are thus taught, through their engagement with digital media technologies, to make their information, desires, and needs legible to these classificatory regimes.

Marketing insiders celebrate personalization for its capacity to supersede standardized mass culture and actually “*know*” the consumer—much like Negroponte’s vision for the perfect digital butler—using consumer data to tailor the ads, services, and commodities users see.⁴⁷ Given that data collection is predicated on monitoring users in order to track their preferences and behaviors, personalization necessarily requires the surveillance of users’ leisure time. Data analysis presents certain subjects with attractive options, while withholding these options from others, based on predictive models of risk. High-risk consumers “will never be informed about or offered the best deals” because the likelihood of return on capitalist investment is deemed low.⁴⁸ Furthermore, companies like Facebook have been shown to allow advertisers to target or exclude users based on characteristics related to race, gender, class, and ability in relation to a range of goods and services, including housing, employment, and credit, which has culminated, most recently, in a charge for violating the Fair Housing Act.⁴⁹ Target advertising thus reproduces structural inequalities by reinforcing hierarchies of wealth and access.⁵⁰ Even though what the user sees is often framed in terms of personal desire and preference, the presentation of choices online is often based on a computational assessment of the potential profitability of that consumer’s attention, compounded by racist, sexist, classist, and ableist ideas about the “desired” market for a particular ad.

Despite the fact that user data creates profit for retailers and commercial platforms that leverage the data in the advertising marketplace for distributing consumer choices, digital advertisers market personalization to consumers as a means of helping them overcome the “labor” of decision-making—the time and energy required to make choices in a market oversaturated with information. This marketing strategy parallels the twentieth century presentation of domestic technologies as laborsaving, subservient objects, as seen in the examples of vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, and “robot slaves,” discussed earlier. Marketing discourse portrays personalization as a means of reducing the subjective perception of information overload and enabling subjects to use their time more effectively and strategically. The Digital Advertising Alliance explains to users that

When inferences about your interests are used to help select the ads you see online, the ads you receive become more useful. You get more relevant information about the products and services that may appeal to you . . . Getting the right ads at the right time not only can save you time and money, but helps you avoid seeing ads that just aren’t relevant to your needs.⁵¹

Personalization and the metric of relevancy promise to provide users with a means of overcoming information saturation and superfluous choices. In order to offer users the most “relevant” experiences, platform providers, firms, and advertising agencies make use of the information users produce about themselves to deliver the content and goods they are most likely to click on or purchase. In this sense, information overload and the metric of relevancy help render leisure time rationalized—made efficient through time

management and preference monitoring—through the “assistance” of personalization technology predicated on the surveillance of user behavior and choices. In the case of Apple’s Siri or Amazon’s Alexa, another virtual assistant with a feminized voice, user data collection determines what recommendations users receive, which also makes users less likely to explore options outside of the popular content these services prioritize.⁵² Developments in artificial intelligence for smart speakers like Echo, Google Home, and Apple Homepod are on the horizon, which would allow these devices to use sound recognition technology to promote brand-specific advertising as well as health-related treatments.⁵³ This form of data collection not only poses a significant risk to the security of users’ sensitive information should the data be mismanaged or hacked, but these products are also inherently designed to track user behavior for collecting information assets that can then be leveraged to improve the products’ services, generate revenue in the advertising marketplace, and discriminate against users through the selective distribution of consumer choices.

Leisure-Time Surveillance and Marxist Feminism

How then should the link between the marketing of domestic technologies for the home and personalization technologies influence a political response to the rationalization and exploitation of leisure time online? It would be instructive to consider the significance of the Wages for Housework movement and how their insights might inform an analysis of the profits extracted from online attentiveness, given that both domestic labor and online leisure are sites of capitalist oppression outside the traditional workday. The Marxist feminists of the Wages for Housework movement identified how the conceptualization of domestic labor as non-work concealed the ways that unwaged reproductive work was essential to the capitalist mode of production. As Leopoldina Fortunati explains:

Although reproduction appears as the creation of non-value, it clearly contributes to the creation of value as a crucial, integral part of the capitalist cycle . . . Thus the real difference between production and reproduction is not that of value/non-value, but that while production both *is* and *appears as* the creation of value, reproduction *is* the creation of value but appears otherwise.⁵⁴

Reproduction is the precondition for production and thus creates value for capital. Additionally, the division of labor between waged work and unwaged reproductive work proceeds along the lines of gender, constructing domestic labor as implicitly feminine and therefore natural. While domestic labor reproduces the working body of the laborer, it also functions as a key site of capitalist socialization: the family. Selma James explains that the family is the site for socializing and disciplining children to the demands of the capitalist organization of work while simultaneously serving as the center of consumption, reserve labor, and the reproduction of the worker.⁵⁵ The refusal to recognize domestic work as a form of labor kept women auxiliary to the general struggle against capitalism and outside the conceptualization of the working class. This invalidation of the domestic sphere as a site of labor perpetuated women’s isolation in the home and, for Mariarosa Dalla Costa, deprived them of the experience of collectively organizing and planning mass struggles against capitalism.⁵⁶

The demand for the recognition of women’s role in creating value for capital allowed women to become protagonists in the struggle against it. This demand also provided women with a means of overthrowing their spatial isolation in the home, “breaking the tradition of the privatized female, with all its rivalry, and reconstructing a real solidarity among women.”⁵⁷ The wage laborer as an exclusively male working-class formulation perpetuated the appearance of women’s labor as “a personal service outside of capital”

rather than integral to the capitalist mode of production and an intensified space of exploitation.⁵⁸ The “shadow of the single wage given to the male worker in exchange for his work within the process of production” meant for Fortunati that both capitalism and the male worker are able to control and discipline women and children.⁵⁹ Additionally, Fortunati argued that the refusal to recognize the exploitation of the domestic sphere is a self-defeating tendency of the working class because it invisibilizes the full extent of “the cycle of surplus labor, i.e. of exploitation.”⁶⁰

The Wages for Housework movement viewed the struggle for wages as a means of mapping women’s relation to the totality of capitalist domination—a way to demystify and denaturalize domestic and reproductive labor.⁶¹ The demand for wages was a tool in the struggle against capital’s exploitation of domestic labor and helped break the association of housework with natural feminine responsibility.⁶² While for Marx, the wage concealed the production of surplus value by creating the illusion of a fair exchange (labor for wages), for Marxist feminists the wage also concealed and delegitimized labor outside the wage-labor relation and perpetuated women’s subordination to both men and capital.

While the demand for wages helps to demystify the wage system as a gendered system of domination and a vehicle of capitalist exploitation of time outside the traditional boundaries of the workday, for Weeks it “nonetheless demands an expansion of the wage relation rather than a transformation of its terms.”⁶³ And while for Marxist feminists, the demand for wages was not simply a demand for remuneration but an attempt to denaturalize housework as a natural feminine responsibility and generate sites of refusal, this demand was nonetheless recuperated into existing conditions under capitalism.⁶⁴ The struggle for wages was reduced to a struggle to have domestic labor recognized as labor within the capitalist organization of life, thus maintaining the integrity of the wage system that always already deprives the worker the full value of her labor.⁶⁵ What the Wages for Housework movement anticipated was the inability of capital to adequately measure productivity, a crisis that has only intensified under conditions of post-Fordism and the surveillance regime of personalization.

The significance of the Wages for Housework movement for thinking about exploitation and online leisure time is in many ways crystalized in Laurel Ptak’s “Wages for Facebook” provocation. Initially presented at a 2013 group exhibition at UC San Diego’s University Art Gallery prior to circulating on the web, Ptak appropriates Silvia Federici’s 1975 manifesto by replacing the word “housework” with “Facebook” and by reframing the demands and the critique in terms of social networking. Through this appropriation, Ptak conceptualizes the profit extracted from online leisure activity as a form of unremunerated labor. Ptak states in the opening of her piece, “They say it’s friendship. We say it’s unwaged work. With every like, chat, tag or poke our subjectivity turns them a profit.”⁶⁶ Whereas the Wages for Housework movement extended the Marxist critique of factory labor to the home, “Wages for Facebook” includes social networking under the category of highly exploited and unrecognized work, where user information is the commodity users produce about themselves during their time social networking. In “Wages for Facebook,” the demand for wages is theoretically a tool for making visible the exploitation underpinning so-called “leisure time” online. Additionally, like domestic work and its construction as a naturalized condition of femininity, capital figures social networking, according to the “Wages For Facebook” provocation, as a “natural, unavoidable and even fulfilling activity to make us accept unwaged work . . . We are seen as users or potential friends, not workers in a struggle.”⁶⁷ Just as Dalla Costa asserted that the unwaged condition of housework prevented women from struggling against it, using the demand for a wage as a means of centering women in the struggle against capital, “Wages For Facebook” calls for a wage to demystify the value produced by online

activity and challenge the ways that users have been socialized to believe such value-creating activity is an act of friendship rather than labor.⁶⁸ It is thus the exploitation of subjectivity—users’ desires and connections to others—that Ptak’s piece centers. Ptak’s provocation also provides an account of personalization as a technique for exploiting the data users produce about themselves online rather than merely a service that caters to user preferences.

The fact that time outside the wage-relation is increasingly subjected to techniques of surveillance and rationalization potentially reinforces the argument that personalization can be theorized as a site of user labor. After all, if surveillance is an integral part of leisure time online, and if online behavior produces valuable data, perhaps consumption and attentiveness online can be conceptualized as a form of work or production. This argument is in keeping with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s theory of “factory-society”:

laboring processes have moved outside the factory walls to invest the entire society. In other words, the apparent decline of the factory as site of production does not mean a decline of the regime and discipline of factory production, but means rather that it is no longer limited to a particular site in society. It has insinuated itself throughout all forms of social production, spreading like a virus. All of society is now permeated through and through with the regime of the factory, that is, with the rules of the specifically capitalist relations of production.⁶⁹

Jarrett has rightfully pointed out that, “for anyone who is not a white, cis-, het- man, it is difficult to see precisely what is novel about the conditions in which all of life is subsumed into capital.”⁷⁰ The domestic space and interpersonal relations have never been sites of “autonomy and agency but rather . . . venues of (en)forced and uncompensated work, as well as situations of domination and surveillance.”⁷¹ Drawing parallels between the unpaid, quasi-voluntary work of the private, domestic sphere and consumer online activity, she argues that this activity is a form of exploited labor, stating that, “[l]ike housewives, consumers receive little or no direct financial compensation for their contributions to the revenue-generating mechanisms of digital media sites so that all of their labour produces surplus-value for the website provider.”⁷²

However, the idea that online leisure activity is a form of unwaged labor often leads to the framing of the problem as one of remuneration, a framework that is more easily recuperated within the present terms of capitalist exchange. Jaron Lanier’s *Who Owns the Future*, for example, illustrates the ways a critique of exploitation in the digital economy can be transformed into new forms of exploited work. Lanier argues that users should be compensated in the form of micropayments for the data that is expropriated from them online. He asserts:

Pay people for information gleaned from them if that information turns out to be valuable. If observation of you yields data that makes it easier for a robot to seem like a natural conversationalist, or for a political campaign to target voters with its message, then you ought to be owed money for the use of that valuable data. It wouldn’t exist without you, after all.⁷³

For Lanier, the problem is not necessarily ubiquitous surveillance or practices of target advertising that differentially price and skew the distribution of market choices, but the lack of compensation.⁷⁴ “Free” information allows for the concentration of wealth in the hands of platform providers rather than its distribution across user networks. Therefore,

for Lanier, the exchange of user information for nanopayments is a more equitable way of distributing wealth.

Lanier asserts that a system of nanopayments would result in “intrinsic, inalienable *commercial* rights to data that wouldn’t exist without you.”⁷⁵ Lanier thus extends the capitalist terms of exchange—labor for wages—while overlooking the ways that technologies of personalization are a means of subjectivating users as individuals that are governable through the presentation of market choices.⁷⁶ Additionally, nanopayments will hardly return to the worker the full value of her information. Wages will only help to legitimate the platform’s “right” to use the only thing the worker is permitted to sell: her data. Perhaps this is why commercial services have been eager to capitalize on users’ desires to have the collection of their data remunerated.

Services like Datacoup have emerged, which encourage consumers to bring their data to market just like their capacity for labor in the context of the workplace. Their mission statement is as follows:

Our mission [is] to help people unlock the value of their personal data. Almost every link in the economic chain has their hand in our collective data pocket. Data brokers in the US alone account for a \$15bn industry, yet they have zero relationship with the consumers whose data they harvest and sell. They offer no discernible benefit back to the producers of this great data asset- you. Datacoup is changing this asymmetric dynamic that exists around our personal data. The first and most important step is getting people compensated for the asset they produce. We are building for a future where individuals like you are in control of your data and are the chief beneficiaries of its value.⁷⁷

While services like Datacoup call attention to the fact that free services online are predicated on the extraction of data, the ability to exchange one’s private information in exchange for a wage merely reproduces the power asymmetries of the workplace. It should come as no surprise that Datacoup itself is the primary purchaser of the data, and that the majority of offers are in the cents. Thus, the demand for wages as compensation for the exploitation of user data fails to challenge what Weeks described in relation to the Wages for Housework movement as the “dominant legitimating discourse of work,” which ultimately recuperates anti-capitalist impulses into the existing terms of society.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The Wages for Housework movement worked to show that the boundaries between work and family are a patriarchal construct perpetuated in the service of capitalism: by naming part of what happens in the family as work, the demand for wages challenges the division between work as a site of exploitation and the family as a “freely invented site of authentic and purely voluntary relations.”⁷⁹ Additionally, the Wages for Housework movement demonstrated that time outside of productive labor can be put in the service of capital accumulation. For Cox and Federici, this means the real workday is twenty-four hours long, as domestic labor does not have a fixed schedule.⁸⁰ What this speaks to is not the necessity to assign a wage but the precarious distinction between waged and unwaged time, and the ways that distinction has perpetuated women’s subordination to both men and capital. Following Tithi Bhattacharya, I have approached Marxism as “paradigmatic rather than prescriptive . . . a framework or tool to understand social relations and thereby change them. This means, necessarily, that such a tool will sometimes need to be sharpened and honed to fit new, emerging social realities.”⁸¹ In order to theorize the rationalization of leisure time in a way that resists recuperation, I have argued that the terms of the struggle should be shifted from a claim to have online

leisure recognized as labor and adequately compensated by capital to an effort to problematize how the rest of life beyond the wage-relation is harnessed by capital to its “time, spaces, rhythms, purposes, and values.”⁸² The struggle can then be redefined as existing not only between capital and labor but also between capital and the subjects that become vehicles for capital accumulation through the production and management of their desires.

When trying to develop leftist visions for the future that include full automation, such as the post-work politics of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, one needs to account for the ways power relations are inscribed into technologies, and the ways technologies shape desires and interpersonal relationships.⁸³ One cannot assume that demands for full automation, even when complemented with a Universal Basic Income, will lead to greater self-determination for all. Theories of capitalist exploitation and control through digital technologies must address how the gendered and racialized fantasy of machine subordination conceals the rationalization of leisure time, which in fact subordinates users to the rhythms and demands of the digital economy, while perpetuating cultural ideologies that reinforce race- and gender-based oppressions.

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